

Community Economic Development Service Learning in an Online Class Format

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Executive Summary: Community service learning is a natural pedagogical tool for economic development-related classes in higher education. This paper provides fellow faculty with some community service ideas that have been tested in an undergraduate economic geography class. In particular, these projects have served community and state organizations within a class that is delivered in an entirely online format—with a mixture of encouraging and challenging results.

The concepts of community engagement in general and service learning in particular have flourished in higher education curricula over at least the past 25 years (Jacoby & Howard 2014, Kellogg 2002, Boyer 1990, Kendall 1990, Luce 1988). At least part of the motivation for promoting such activities has been the need to disabuse the “enduring, if unfortunate, stereotype of the university [as] the ‘ivory tower’—an isolated entity, elitist, disconnected from the place in which it is situated and from practical matters of the ‘real’ world” (Klein *et al.* 2011, 425). Community engagement can also provide a visible means for universities to help justify their use of increasingly scarce public resources. Community projects can be a means, too, for academics to apply theory and methods to real world applications, better engage students in their studies and future careers, and enhance their professional networks.

In addition to scholarly research on service learning (Butin 2010), a wide variety of practical pedagogical resources are available both for interested faculty (Jacoby & Howard 2014) and students (Cress, Colleir, & Reitenauer 2013). The following is a fairly standard & broadly encompassing definition of service learning:

... a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service

activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations. Unlike practica and internships, the experiential activity in a service learning course is not necessarily skill-based within the context of professional education. (Bringle & Hatcher 1996, 222)

My only question with Bringle & Hatcher’s definition above concerns who identifies the community need: the community itself, or the professor or students? My own preference is the former, having observed ill-conceived student projects that angered rather than helped to engage community members. This paper will further address community engagement challenges later.

Jacoby & Howard (2014) briefly addresses service learning courses in an online class format—as a relatively new educational frontier with a number of potential advantages and challenges. Like any online class, the format provides educational opportunities for students who may be living in a wide variety of remote U.S. or international locations, in military service, home-bound, etc. (I have had online students in all these situations.) Jacoby notes that these same advantages apply to students who might not otherwise be able to have access to a service learning experience.

There are also a number of obvious challenges to service learning in an online format, including online students' lack of physical interaction with a particular community site, community leaders, and residents. Even if students can view the community through, perhaps, Google Earth, or communicate with community members electronically, there are always limitations with regard to timely available data, community members' technological abilities, and similar limitations. Jacoby & Howard (2014) note a number of “work-arounds,” including a hybrid course format (i.e., a combination of online teaching and at least one in-person class session) or a service learning project in which students work with a community of their own choosing, to which they have access.

Is it possible to engage students effectively in a community development service learning experience within a fully online class format, all working together on a project in a single community of the professor's choosing? That is the central question for the present paper. If so, the result could provide something close to the rich learning and community outreach experience that is familiar to many professors of economic development and related fields in our in-person classes.

On the other hand, this format also provides a number of significant challenges, also discussed in this paper, which are yet far from resolved.

I. Background

My own university's explicit commitment to community service learning began in 2001, when my Communication Studies colleague, Richard Conville, offered our first semester-long faculty seminar on the theory and practice of service learning. I participated in the seminar in 2004; the concept then was new and exciting for most of my fellow faculty participants, most from the campus's liberal arts departments. As a professor in our Geography, Planning, and Economic Development programs, however, I realized that we had been engaging our students in community projects for decades without framing such projects in the context of service learning—a concept that was gaining acceptance and recognition on campus.

Geographers were among the fairly early adopters of the service learning concept (Mohan 1995, Dorsey 2001). This is not surprising: after all, Lay Gibson had been my major professor in the University of Arizona's Department of Geography and Regional Development. How many hundreds of UA undergraduates have slogged across hot, remote Arizona towns gathering data for economic base analyses? Lay would analyze the data, explain the findings to community leaders for their own ED efforts, and incorporate the “meta-data” from dozens of such projects into academic papers (Gibson and Worden 1981). Just in case Arizona wasn't sweltering enough for our students, Lay and I even walked a few classes through an economic base survey of St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica.

When I joined the then-Department of Geography & Area Development at my current institution, I again found engaged, kindred spirits among those faculty members. I doubt a single ED, planning, or economic geography student graduated without a community-engaged class project, thesis research, or internship.

Almost three decades later I remain at the same institution, but the world of teaching in higher education continues to change and challenge, particularly with regard to online teaching. I started teaching doctoral courses in a hybrid executive format in 1998. I taught my first fully online classes in 2009, beginning with introductory World Regional Geography.

Today, nationwide, “... online courses are ubiquitous, with more than 80% of institutions [of higher education] offering at least several courses online and more than half offering a significant number of courses online” (Bichsel 2013). Well over six million students are now taking online higher education courses in any given term, with at least one-third of students now taking at least one online course during their college career (Allen & Seaman 2013). Although the explosive growth of online learning may have slowed (*Inside Higher Ed* 2015), and skepticism persists among both faculty and administrators (Allen & Seaman 2013), online learning will continue to play a major role in higher education in nearly all disciplines of study.

Two years ago, I gained approval for a fully online junior-level economic geography course—with heavy ED content—to be taught during summer terms. Our students scatter far and wide during summer; I believed there could be demand for an upper-level course students could take while they were engaged in a summer job, internship, or even international travel. Because I regularly survey my online students, I also know that a significant share of those students are place-bound, due to disabilities, childcare responsibilities, or care for elderly relatives. On the other hand, I try to include some sort of community-based, experiential class project in most of the upper-level courses

I teach. The result has been a continuing experiment in integrating the online format with the concepts of experiential learning and community service.

II. Methods and Purpose

I wish I could report that the design of these experimental class projects was deliberate, systematic, and analytical in nature. Instead, the design was opportunistic, and largely built on incremental changes in earlier, face-to-face class project designs. Perhaps this approach, if not ideal, mirrors the reality of many of my teaching faculty colleagues.

Similarly, the assessments of the projects presented here are not thorough in their experimental design. I provide my own assessment of the experience, available student course assessment data, and qualitative feedback from community counterparts.

The purpose of this paper, then, is limited in scope. I hope to provide some ideas (or “promising practices”) for my ED teaching colleagues based on my own experiences, provide an exploratory analysis, and suggest some indications for further development, assessment, and improvement of the concept.

III. Designs for Online Community Service Projects

Shortly before my first online economic geography class was scheduled to begin, a friend and local business owner connected me with Valerie Wilson, the dynamic new Chamber of Commerce Director of the small, nearby city of Petal, Mississippi. I already had some familiarity with the city, since a face-to-face class of students had joined the Mississippi Development Authority in an asset mapping project of Petal the previous year.

Valerie was especially interested in capitalizing on a stretch of city-owned riverfront property, which had been largely overgrown and neglected to that point—and possibly in danger of being sold for use as a scrapyard or other business that could survive in a flood zone. Meanwhile, the City of Hattiesburg, on the opposite bank of the same stretch of riverfront, had just completed a park with plans on the board for more extensive recreational development. Petal’s new Chamber Director had lots of ideas for higher-use potential of their side of the river, but little time available to research those ideas. On the spot, I volunteered the services of my upcoming class.

Through subsequent meetings and email correspondence with the Chamber Director, I drafted a list of 19 ED research questions of interest to the Chamber related to the city’s riverfront. Eleven students enrolled in the online class that summer, and I allowed the students to pick their preferred topic. I asked students to choose a topic which most interested them or in which they already

had some knowledge or prior experience. Following are some of those topics:

- Bike trails for mountain/trail bikes: what can be the economic impacts for a community like Petal?
- Canoeing/kayaking/tubing: what cost factors and other considerations are involved in developing a good-quality canoeing/kayaking/tubing site? Good examples?
- A recreational vehicle camping park: what cost factors and other considerations are involved in developing a good-quality RV camp park? How much land would be needed? Good examples?
- What are some federal and state government grant opportunities for developing a site like this?
- Keeping down crime in municipal parks: what are the best strategies? What are the costs involved? Good examples?
- What are the best attractions to get young professionals to use a property like this? (Cities are eager to attract the young, well-educated “creative class” of residents these days.) Even though you are young and creative, I need you to find some real evidence for your conclusions, as well as good examples.

The students’ research sources could include academic papers, materials from professional organizations, and websites concerning comparable projects in other communities. I also encouraged students to reach out to contacts in those professional organizations and other communities by email and phone, for follow-up interviews about the materials they had studied online.

I discussed with the Chamber Director the medium for the students’ reports that would be most useful for her needs. She had already prepared a PowerPoint presentation for the city’s Board of Alderman—providing a general overview of the riverfront and its potential—so we agreed to continue working in that format. I was able to share her general presentation online with my students, to provide them with a background on the site and the ideas proposed; this overview was especially important since most of the students would never have the opportunity to visit the site concerned. The students were also able to incorporate and elaborate on some of Valerie’s slides in their own projects. I added a podcast of my own narrative about the community and my expectations for the project.

A project of this nature provides the professor with a good context to discuss research professionalism. Throughout the project, I referred to the Chamber as our “client,” even though the work was conducted *pro bono*. Among the points I emphasized to the students, their research product had to

- Specifically focus on the needs and questions of the client
- Present the material in a concise, attractive, and clear format
- Build on credible, current, authoritative sources—not simply the student’s opinion; and
- Avoid typographical and grammatical errors.

Since the students could not give in-person presentations of their work, their PowerPoint presentations would have to be of especially high quality and stand alone in providing information. I reviewed partial, first drafts of their projects at the mid-point of the term, and provided the students with feedback for their final product.

In the end, of course, the quality of the final student projects varied, but all were of sufficient quality to provide to the Chamber “client.” Figure 1 provides an excerpt from one of the PPT slideshows prepared by a student, in this case addressing the potential for a recreational vehicle park on the river. (All figures provided with written permission of the students.)

The next summer, 2015, the same course approaches. I happened to have three meetings in Jackson with state-level agencies and organizations, and all three inspired opportunities for similar service learning projects: the Asset Development Division of the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA, our state ED agency), the Parents’ Campaign Research & Education Fund, and Bike-Walk Mississippi.

For the past several years, teams led by the MDA’s Asset Development Division have completed asset mapping projects in over 70 Mississippi communities. New leadership and changing priorities at MDA were about to bring those projects to an end. I asked Division Director Joy Foy if she had plans to analyze and consolidate the results of their years of community research. She liked the idea, but could not spare the time or personnel. She offered the division’s support, however, by providing me with digital copies of all 70+ community reports.

I wanted to put our best foot forward for MDA, a valuable partner for our university’s ED programs. I offered the assignment to two students who had excelled in a previous class with me. I also recruited Chris Ryals, a graduate student and community college GIS instructor, to take the course for graduate credit and collaborate with the

two undergraduate students I had selected. I divided the reports between the undergraduate students with instructions to “read through all these reports and (1) identify common themes, and (2) identify unusual assets that stand out among these communities.” I assigned the graduate student “... to help work on the project, and to help me prepare a good product to present to the MDA. You may also be able to contribute some map work for the project.”

Figure 1. Selected slides from student project by Melissa Johnson-DeReis.

Petal Between the Bridges RV Park



[Okatoma Resort & RV Park](http://www.okatomaresort.com), Accessed on 6 Jul 2014, <http://www.okatomaresort.com>

By Melissa Johnson-DeReis

USM Economic Geography ,Summer 2014
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- **Construction**
Cost per unit varies with the quality of the project.
A nice park that will accommodate modern RVs could run about \$15,000 – \$25,000 per site.
(Stockwell, Rich, email interview, Rich@RVParkConsulting.com, <http://www.rvparkconsulting.com>)

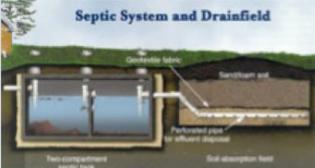
- **Utilities**



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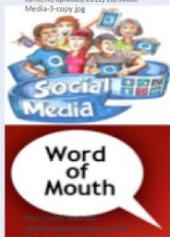
- **Advertising**



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Top Ten Favorite Campgrounds » Gypsy Journal RV Travel Newspaper gypsyjournalrv.com 640 x 307-Search by image



<http://socialloyaltyapes.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Social-Media-Icons.jpg>

Figure 1. Selected slides from student project by Melissa Johnson-DeReis (continued).



Working in coordination, the students identified seven main categories of commonalities among the recommendations for the communities. The final report elaborates on all these themes, including illustrations and specific examples from communities across the state. Among the commonalities:

- A comprehensive long-range community development plan can help guide communities in seeking a good balance of businesses, help ensure development, maintain community identity or branding, offer the best potential to prospective industries, and promote a higher quality of life.
- Communities should invest in way-finding signage to invite motorists to exit the highway and visit downtown, to guide them to tourist attractions, sites, parks, food, and shopping.
- Promote tourism as ED: clearly mark tourist attractions and routes; maintain good curb appeal for community entrances, businesses, and throughout the community.

challenges and opportunities faced by developing Mississippi communities.

Figure 2 provides examples of maps included in the report, offering a state-wide perspective on common

Figure 2. Map prepared by graduate student Chris Ryals, with data from undergraduate students Mary Travis and Danielle Walters.

Representation of Asset Mapping Data for Select Mississippi Communities
Mississippi Development Authority
July 2015
County Coverage Map

This map represents counties classified by if a MDA Asset Mapping study was conducted in that county.

The MDA study surveyed 36 of the 82 counties in the state; ranging from densely populated, urban settings to more rural and remote settings.



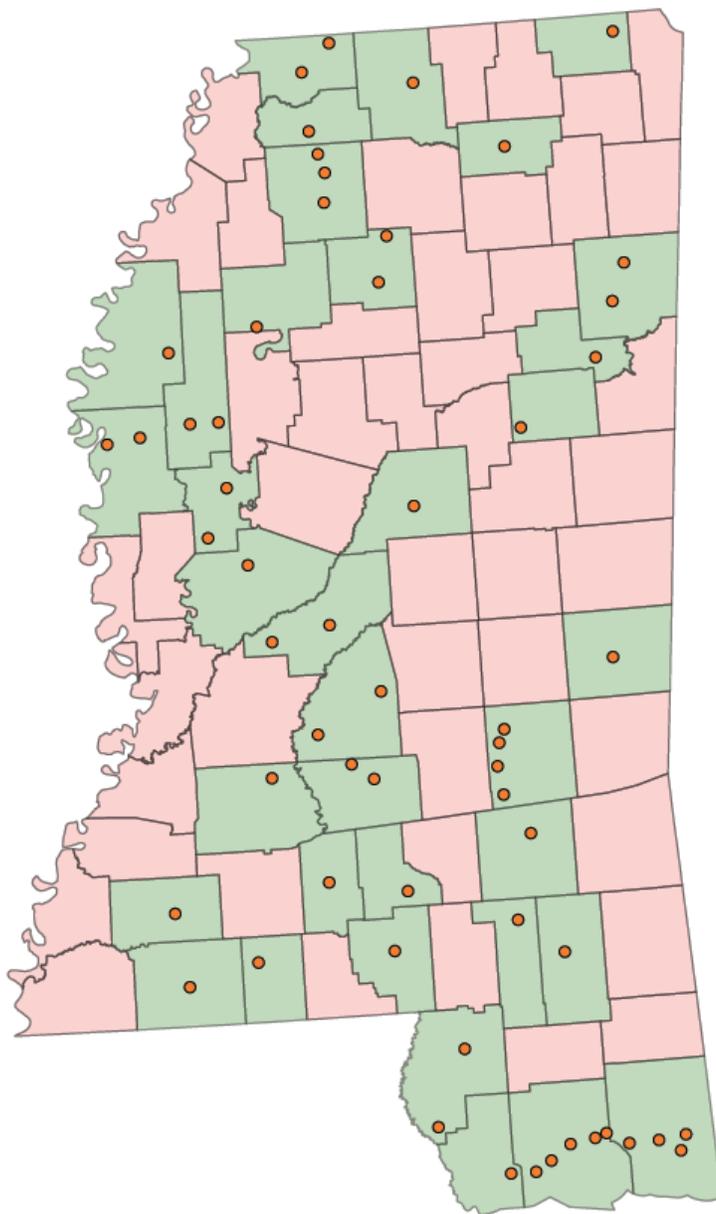
Legend

● Surveied Communities

MDA Assessed Counties

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See attached report for data sources and links to metadata.
Map Developed by: C. Ryals

1:2,500,000

Following are excerpts from the project options I offered the remaining 14 students taking that summer's class. I allowed the students to choose among the topics on a first-come basis, with no more than two or three students assigned to any one topic. All the topics were suggested by the "clients" as areas of particular current interest for them.

Client: The Parents' Campaign Research & Education Fund. This is a statewide organization devoted to researching and advocating for public education in Mississippi. Options in this regard:

1b) Find good, reliable, up-to-date statistics on public education funding for school districts in Mississippi, along with comparable economic data for their communities--such as per capita income and employment rates. Does there appear to be some relationship between public education funding levels and community prosperity?

Client: Bike-Walk Mississippi. This is a statewide organization that provides technical support to communities and advocates for bicycle and pedestrian transportation in the state. Options in this regard:

2a) Find good, reliable, up-to-date information on how bike/pedestrian trails can contribute to the economy of communities in the U.S.

2b) Find good, reliable, up-to-date information on how bike/pedestrian trails can be "equitable": that is, how they can serve minority or low-income communities in the U.S....

The presentation medium I assigned for these projects was new both to most of the students and me: information graphics or "infographics." This idea was suggested by Melody Moody, Executive Director of Bike Walk Mississippi. Melody prefers infographics for efficiently and effectively presenting data to busy decision-makers, from state legislators to local community leaders. She provided my students with examples she had prepared for her own professional presentations, and links to online tools such as Piktochart. Figure 3 shows excerpts of student-created infographics on biking-related development.

Figure 3. Excerpts from bike development-related infographics prepared by students Joshua Wiles and Samantha Metzler.

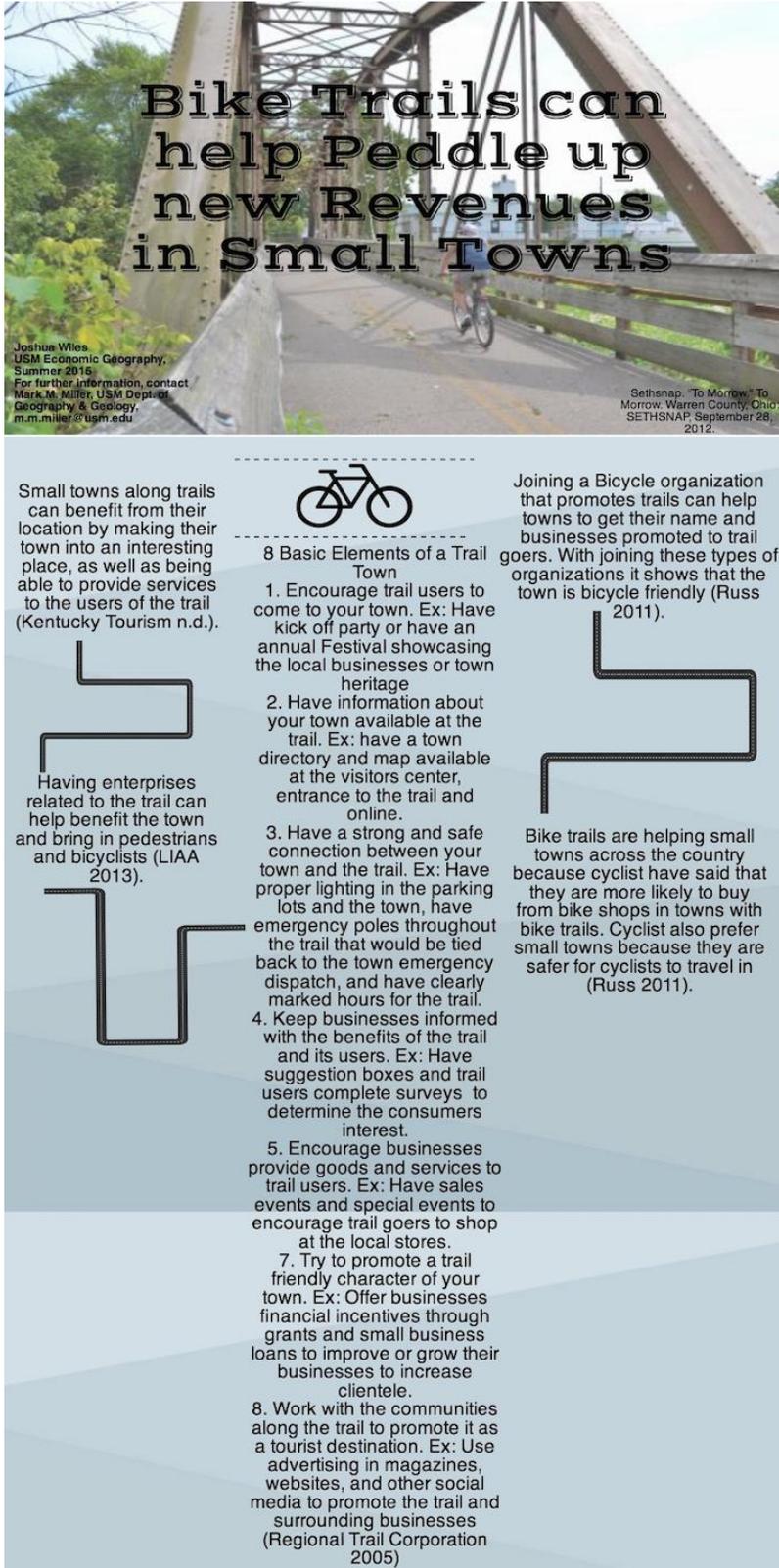
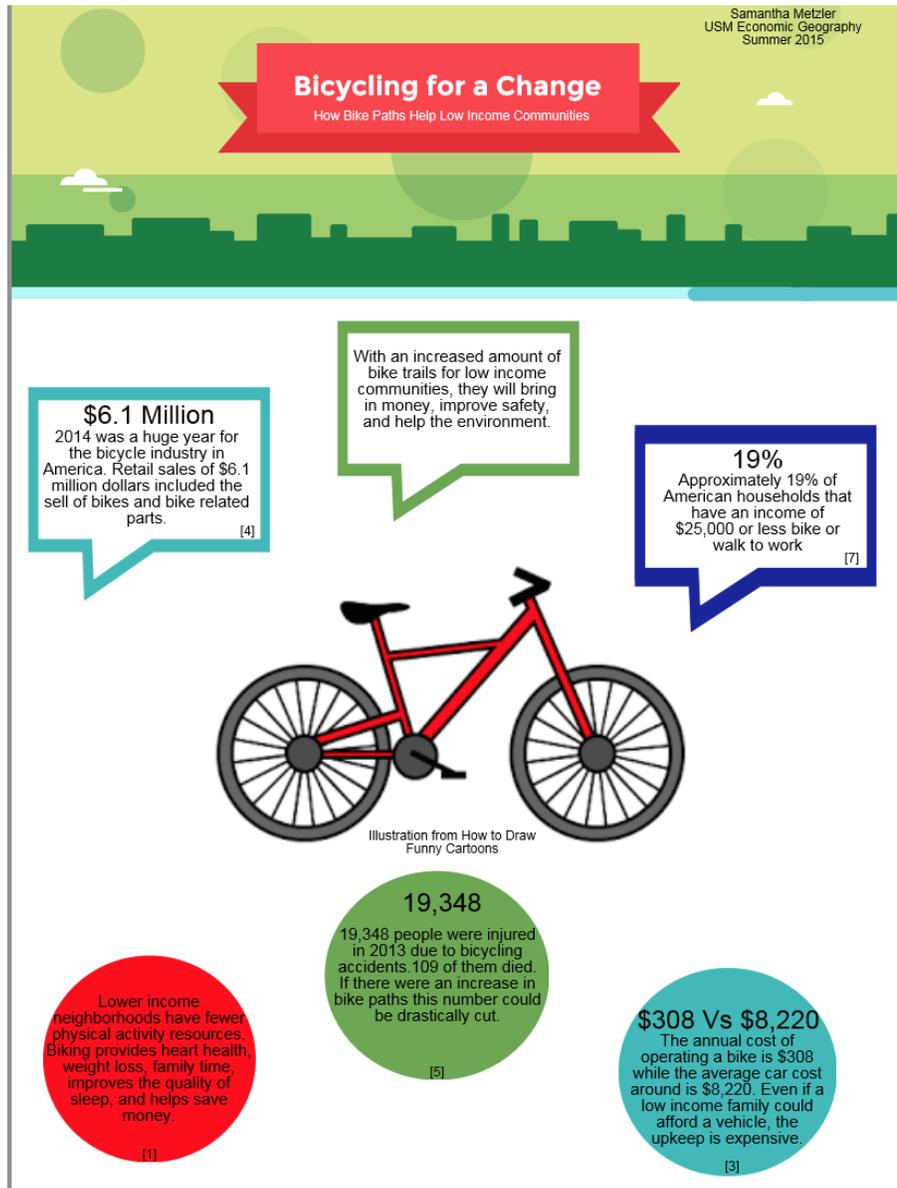


Figure 3. Excerpts from bike development-related infographics prepared by students Joshua Wiles and Samantha Metzler (continued).



IV. Assessments

Professors are well aware of the conceptual and statistical limitations of student evaluations...but we still use them. Students for the first iteration of the course—working with the Petal Chamber—gave a 100 percent “highest” rating to “The instructor attempts to involve students in course discussions/activities,” a rating of 86 percent “highest” and 14 percent “high” for “Effectiveness of the instructor in stimulating your interest in the subject,” and the same “high” and “highest” ratings to “Effectiveness of this course in challenging you

intellectually.” One anonymous written comment from a student:

This... was a unique on-line class. I... liked putting together a presentation for Petal rather than writing a paper. I felt more involved with the project work!

It is difficult to evaluate the practical results of the project in terms of effectiveness. (They have not yet broken ground on a new RV park based on a student’s recommendation.) Here, however, is anecdotal response

from the Chamber Director in response to the student RV park presentation:

AWESOME! I just went through the RV park PowerPoint. It provided exactly what I needed in considering a RV park for our site. Pros, cons, and food for thought. I'm anxious to study it more thoroughly. I can't estimate how much time and effort that saved me!

Also, one of the student's professional sources—an RV consultant whom she interviewed by phone—followed up on the project a few months later. I was able to send him a copy of the final presentation, to which he responded “Glad students are looking at actual projects.”

For the next summer's class, the student evaluations were similar: 86 percent “strongly agree” and 14 percent “agree” for all three categories mentioned above. Again, here is an anonymous written comment from the evaluations, which I found especially gratifying as a professor: “I enjoyed Econ. Ghy. more than any class I've taken. I have learned a lot, but in some ways have more questions than ever in the areas I'm interested in.” Also: “This was one of the most interesting and informative classes I've taken. I had no idea going into the class that I would learn so many things that will help me in my career as well as in being a more informed person.”

With regard to the report for our state ED office, I worked closely with the three students involved to revise, tighten, and refine the report. After we delivered the report, the Division was eager to make their own edits and additions to the document. From the Director:

Thank you for your interest in our work and I really appreciated your outside analysis and compilation of the reports. I had not realized the population breakdown and that was very interesting to me. This will be helpful to us going forward.

One of the students—Mary Travis—also continued working with the project as part of her thesis research on a particular ED initiative in the Mississippi Delta. Here was the response from the Community Assets Development Director, when Mary shared that report:

You have made my day. Thank you for your interest in what we are doing. I appreciate your kindness and willingness to help in the Delta. I'm thankful for getting to meet you. Please keep me posted about your accomplishments. Thank you.

V. Conclusions, Limitations, & Indications for Further Development

As noted earlier, the above studies are presented in the spirit of “promising practices,” intended mainly to stimulate ideas for fellow teachers of online ED-related courses. They are not represented here as pedagogical

paragons, and indeed there are several significant challenges that must be addressed in future classes.

Reflection. The definition of service learning at the outset of this article emphasizes the central role of “reflection activities” for students, to integrate the service experience with classroom learning. As highlighted further by Kellogg (2002),

A key component of a service learning class occurs when students, faculty, and community participants reflect on the processes, activities, and outcomes of university/community engagement. These opportunities might include creation of student journals, class discussion time for debriefing weekly activities, joint community-student discussion sessions, and community evaluation of students' work. (p. 74)

My experience with online service learning helped me realize that I have treated the reflective element very informally in traditional face-to-face classes. My students and I normally “reflect” together on the van ride back from a community project, then again during the next scheduled class period. There are advantages to this informality in terms of classroom dynamic, but I also now realize that a more systematic, written reflection period can provide additional advantages. It is an easy matter to set up a discussion forum online, but individual written reflection is just as important; among other things, many of the quieter student voices are often lost in a group discussion setting.

Online experience also made me realize that I should be more deliberate about community engagement. In local service learning projects, I've known many of the community leaders and residents for years, and—similarly—there is a great deal of informal and ongoing engagement. That informal engagement becomes more tenuous as face to face contact becomes more distant. There is also the danger of leaving out important community voices when the engagement is too personal and informal.

Presentation media. The infographic medium may be trendy and appealing in many ways, but I found it to be very limiting in terms of the amount and quality of research that the students could present. For now on, I plan to limit its use to very short, concise research assignments.

Systematic assessment. As with any teaching activity, there is always a need for better evaluation and continuous improvement. Probably the most lacking element of assessment in my online service learning projects to date has been feedback to the students and me from the community leaders and residents involved. This often happens naturally in face-to-face classes, especially if students give oral presentations of their findings to the

community. Such a feedback loop should be built into an online version of a service learning course—and, once again, helps remind me that deliberate attention to systematic evaluation is vital in any in-person class setting, as well.

As with any teaching experience, I have found online service learning to be both exciting and challenging. I look forward to more innovation and improvement from my academic colleagues in this new pedagogical frontier.

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